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NAVAL ARMS CONTROL: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

BY

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NAVAL ARMS CONTROL: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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ABSTRACT

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Arms control initiatives have played an important role in American politics dating back to 1817. Naval arms control agreements made during the period between World War I and World War II may have indirectly led to the United States being outflanked in naval power by what would become its adversaries (Germany and Japan). These bloody lessons have not easily been forgotten. Yet since the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union has intensified political pressure to incorporate naval arms limitations into overall arms control negotiations. This study explores the ongoing negotiations and the implications of future agreements given the unstable international security environment and the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In its final analysis, this paper concludes that major concessions in naval arms control during this period of uncertainty, is not in the best interest of U.S. national interest.

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NAVAL ARMS CONTROL: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

We have never considered, and do not now consider, that it is an ideal situation when the navies of the great powers are cruising about for long periods far from their own shores, and we are prepared to solve this problem, but to solve it, as they say, on an equal basis. On the basis of such principles, the Soviet Union is ready to discuss any proposals.¹

INTRODUCTION

We have observed the cold war come to an abrupt end, and with it an apparent reduction of the former Soviet military threat facing the United States. Our national leadership can now expect to face increased pressure to bring to a close the long hibernation of naval arms control. Such pressure will most certainly come from both the economic as well as the political arena.

This paper outlines the major naval arms control initiatives presently being negotiated between the United States and the former Soviet Union. The basic arguments for and against those initiatives will be examined and the implications of their acceptance discussed. Finally, a conclusion will be offered whether such agreements are in the best interest of the United States at this time of evolutionary change in the international security environment.

BACKGROUND

Arms control initiatives have played an important role in American politics throughout history. Beginning with the Rush-Bagot agreement of 1817 between the United States and Great Britain, limitations were imposed on the size of armed forces along the Great Lakes. In more recent years, naval arms control agreements were reached in 1921, when the Washington Conference resulted in the destruction of several U.S. battleships. The 1930 London Naval Treaty extended substantive limitations on ship size and number of guns on cruisers, destroyers, and submarines of the U.S., Great Britain, and Japanese navies.² But subsequent negotiations in 1934 and 1935 confirmed the inability of arms control negotiations to succeed when states are dissatisfied with the status quo and are moving toward hostile intent.

During 1934 and 1935, a period of relative calm in the world, the U.S. and Great Britain signed numerous naval arms limitations agreements while Japan (although a party to such agreements) and Germany continued to develop strong powerful navies. Only in hindsight, and almost too late, did Western leaders fully realize the extent to which they had been duped. "Never since Jefferson's time," Samuel Eliot Morison later wrote, "had America and never in recorded history had England, been in so pacifist a mood as in 1933-39."³

Our willingness to conduct naval arms reductions ground to a standstill, however, upon the outbreak of World War II. Since that time Americans have been very reluctant to allow their navy to stand in the shadow of any other. Memories of the interwar period's naval agreements and their impending near disastrous results continue to trouble many in the West even today. With the exception of the US-Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement of 1972, the subject of naval arms control has, over the past five decades, fallen predominately on deaf American ears.

Remembrances in the West of past experiences with naval arms limitations, particularly those of the 1920s and 1930s, had left a poor perception of what was good and sensible in this area. To the generations which fought World War II, naval arms control was not a fond memory. In 1946, President Truman told a cabinet meeting that:

He would be in favor of disarmament once the major questions involved in a global plan were disposed of (but) that he was not willing to place the country in the position which it had been placed in by the 1922 Naval Disarmament Conference, namely, that of unilateral disarmament with the resulting weakening of our position in the world.⁴

This paper poses the question, is it not time to once more return to the negotiating table and consider reducing the size, strength, and influence currently inherent in the U.S. and former Soviet navies.

At Soviet insistence, the issue of naval arms control assumed greater prominence in contemporary US-Soviet security negotiations. Beginning in 1986, the Soviet Union began to intensify its public diplomacy efforts to engage the United States and its Western allies in negotiations aimed at limiting naval forces and naval activities. In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee in July 1989, Marshal Sergei Akromeyev, Gorbachev's chief military adviser, suggested that "no drastic reductions in the armed forces and armaments of the world will be possible" unless the United States "will ... accommodate our concerns with regard to naval forces."⁵ Under Soviet President Gorbachev the East had more to say about naval arms limitations, more persistently, more frequently, and generally more skillfully.

By mid-1988 the Soviets began to articulate clear linkages between their goals in the naval sphere and the future progress of conventional arms control on other fronts. The pertinent questions which military and political leaders must now ask themselves are, why were the Soviets so concerned with reducing our naval capabilities, and will the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) pick up the ball and continue to press for similar reductions? More importantly, is it now in our nation's best interest to continue with negotiations toward bilateral reductions?

THE THREAT

Before attempting to attack this historically controversial issue of naval arms control, it is first necessary to examine the threat, or perceived threat, which may require the United States to maintain such a credible naval power as we have enjoyed in recent decades. As the entire world has observed the dissolution of the once threatening Soviet Union, several questions deserve consideration by world leaders. What threat, if any, does the fragmented CIS military now pose to the West in general and to the United States specifically? And if the former Soviet military can now be discounted, are there other credible military threats to U.S. national security? If so, what naval capabilities will be required to meet such threats? Although this paper will not attempt to answer these questions, they form an underlying foundation to the paper's thesis and therefore were confronted throughout its development.

For the past 45 years the potential threat provided by the Cold War has served as a central catalyst for U.S. naval requirements and resultant capabilities. Clearly however, the bulldozing of the Berlin Wall, the crumbling of the Soviet economy and its political infrastructure, combined with a renewed spread of democratic reform worldwide, and a plethora of domestic concerns in our own country, require a close reexamination of our costly military. A growing number of our political leaders believe that the collapse of communism and the severe fiscal

crisis in the United States indicate that even deeper cuts in our naval force structure, beyond that already planned, is imminent. Recent congressional testimony indicates that the US Navy can expect to undergo unilateral reductions from its existing 550 ships down to some 450 over the next five years.

Regional conflict, not unlike the one we recently faced in the Persian Gulf, has replaced global war as the major focus of our defense planning. A new national military strategy is being developed even now to meet this uncertain, diverse, and potentially more volatile threat. As our political and military leaders grapple with this new threat, they must soon make critical decisions regarding measures our nation must take to meet future challenges. Naval arms control is one such issue facing our leadership. Let's examine what initiatives are before them for consideration, while keeping in mind that today's agreements can also easily become tomorrow's headaches.

NAVAL ARMS CONTROL NEGOTIATIONS

The term "naval arms control" should be understood in a broad sense to mean "including naval forces and activities in the arms control process."⁶ In other words, when discussing naval arms control one should not think only in terms of aircraft carriers, battleships, and submarines. Naval arms control agreements can include a wide range of hardware, training, operations, and other less tangible issues.

It is useful to delineate the three main categories of naval arms control measures as they pertain to existing proposals offered for negotiation. They are structural, operational, and confidence building measures (CBMs). Any viable arms control regime or measure involving navies will have to take account of their national role and relative importance with respect to the overall security objectives of each country. The U.S. is fundamentally a maritime nation. The Soviet Union (now CIS) is not. This indicates that the navies of these different nations have clearly different roles. What were already difficult negotiations between the US and the former Soviet Union will now become more diplomatically challenging as the Soviet navy is presently being divided between several CIS powers. For instance, negotiations are underway now to determine which country within the CIS will have authority over the former, and still very powerful Soviet Black Sea fleet. Regardless, it is envisioned that naval arms control talks will continue between the US and CIS leadership. Let's now examine in detail the three primary categories of naval arms control measures presently under negotiation.

STRUCTURAL MEASURES

Structural measures are those intended to place ceilings on force structure and capabilities (weapons, manpower, and facilities). President Bush's recent unilateral decision which

was equalled by then President Gorbachev to eliminate all naval tactical nuclear weapons afloat is an example of such a structural measure. This means removing all nuclear Tomahawk cruise missiles from US ships and submarines, as well as nuclear bombs aboard aircraft carriers. Most of these land and sea-based warheads are to be destroyed. However, our political and military leaders are no doubt asking themselves what impact the recent downfall of the Soviet Union will have on this and additional structural agreements within future naval arms control negotiations? Does the CIS now have the same leverage to push for significant reductions in our naval fleets as President Gorbachev had been so adamant about only months ago? Or do they no longer have any leverage at all in their present vulnerable position? Certainly these questions will play a major role in future naval arms control talks.

OPERATIONAL MEASURES

Operational measures being negotiated are those intended in some way to constrain or restrict future military operations by both or all parties in agreement. In particular are those actions which could be perceived by either nation to be unnecessarily dangerous or provocative. Large scale naval exercises or antisubmarine warfare operations in the vicinity or close proximity of the other nation's homeland have been common concerns of both countries in the past. Naval activities in the

vicinity of strategic sea lines of communication (SLOC), key to the other party, are also areas around which such negotiations have centered in recent years.

The most notable example of such operational concerns is the increased expansion by both the US and Soviets in submarine activities since the 1970s. This has led to increased provocative behavior, often a dangerous game of "cat and mouse", and on occasion has resulted in collisions and probable near misses. One such incident occurred in the Sea of Japan in 1984, when a Victor III-class Soviet submarine bumped the USS Kitty Hawk. The two vessels were engaged in a dangerous yet commonplace naval maneuver as part of normal antisubmarine warfare operations at the time.⁷ Other examples of provocative operations have included the practice of submarine surge deployments into the other nation's territorial waters or other covert activities thus stretching the other's surveillance forces to their limits.

CONFIDENCE AND SECURITY BUILDING MEASURES

Confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) are agreements aimed at establishing or increasing confidence in a nation's behavior or intentions. These include actions not often thought of by some as arms control issues. Direct dialogue, data exchange, limits on the size, number, duration, and location of naval exercises, or reciprocal port calls are only a few examples

of the variety of possible CSBMs presently under negotiation.⁸ There can be no greater confidence building measure than for would-be adversaries to begin cooperating in areas of mutual concern. An excellent example of this was the Soviet Union's support of US and coalition efforts against Iraq during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. However, despite the clear utility of mutual, unilateral steps to reduce tensions between very powerful navies, such confidence-building measures are more easily reversible and more difficult to evaluate than formal agreements.

Each of the three categories of bilateral measures discussed above contain variations of naval arms control proposals. An overview of the advantages and disadvantages as well as perceived implications of the major initiatives with respect to U.S. national security interests, in light of the present international security environment, are discussed below.

ADVANTAGES

Is there a legitimate case for naval arms control? And if there is, what are the implications of implementing such agreements? Clearly, there exists sufficient incentive for serious consideration of at least some naval arms control initiatives. To respond to the apparent reduced Soviet military threat; to reduce the risk of nuclear war at sea; to reduce the potential of destruction of the U.S. Navy; and to reduce an ever-

growing federal deficit are but a few of the more prominent rationale espoused by naval arms control advocates.

The leadership and guidance put forth by our Commander-in-Chief in his National Security Strategy of the United States of August 1991, emphasized the significance of future arms control talks. The President stated "Our strategy for this new era recognizes the opportunities and challenges before us, and includes among its principles ... cooperating with the Soviet Union and others in achieving arms control agreements that promote security and stability."⁹ Almost to the day however, as the President spoke those eloquent words of US-Soviet cooperation, there was a coup being played out in Moscow. That event began a remarkable series of changes within the former Soviet Union. Do President Bush's words still ring true? Or do we now find ourselves in a truly unipolar world with the United States unequalled militarily? Finally, does the United States still require its potent naval force? In the face of dramatic changes in the world since August 1991, where do we now stand on the subject of naval arms control?

There is no denying that today there exists a far less military threat of global war than before the breakup of the Warsaw Pact, the aborted Soviet coup, and the forming of the new Commonwealth of Independent States. These factors alone present a formidable argument in support of naval arms control from the perspective of the American public at large. In addition, the Commonwealth of Independent States has continued to link ground

force reductions to U.S. naval reductions. They would enjoy nothing more than to portray our stubborn position on this issue in the past, as the single limiting factor in preventing a follow on conventional arms treaty after the July 1990 Conventional Forces Europe (CFE) treaty.

The former Soviets, have in the past, played heavily on the western sense of "fair play". They have come to clearly understand the meaning of the western cliche "you don't get something for nothing". In the past, to the Soviets a conventional and strategic balance has been held as unacceptable if the United States maintained naval superiority. Will Boris Yeltsin and the other CIS leaders be more conciliatory when faced with their present economic and political instability? If ever there was a time in the US-Soviet naval arms control negotiations, now may be an opportunity for the United States to strive for "something for nothing".

Through bilateral naval force reductions, operational restrictions, and expanded CBMs, is it not logical to assume that the risk of nuclear war at sea between the two major navies of the world could be significantly reduced? As several prominent U.S. officials (including Admiral Crowe and Paul Nitze) suggested, is it not feasible to eliminate all Soviet and U.S. nonstrategic naval nuclear weapons, thus reducing the risk of nuclear war at sea. This would also greatly enhance the survivability of the U.S. Navy.¹⁰ Late last year we witnessed just such an initiative offered unilaterally by President Bush.

For the US, this would amount to some 500 nuclear weapons being removed from ships and submarines at sea. Only days later, on 5 October 1991, then Soviet President Gorbachev agreed to equal President Bush's offer to rid all tactical nuclear weapons from surface ships and multipurpose submarines.

Confidence and security building measures such as prior notification of naval exercises, direct dialogue, data exchange, and reciprocal port visits are widely considered the most promising form of naval arms control in the immediate future. Although all naval arms control talks may be temporarily on hold until the U.S. becomes more confident with the current instability within the CIS.

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

Finally, let's examine the obvious and currently most popular rationale for reducing both navies - economics. Both the United States and former Soviet navies are presently undergoing unilateral reductions. Increased economic pressures in both countries and the perceived reduction of a military threat has demanded such reductions. It became all too clear that neither nation could economically afford to continue the five decade old arms race. Even before the demise of the Soviet Union, U.S. political and economic advisors were pushing strongly for military reforms and force reductions based purely on an economic perspective. Defense expenditures could no longer be sustained

at the rate they had been in the past. Growing concern over our runaway federal deficit reached a point beyond which many U.S. congressional leaders were unwilling to go. Now combined with a reduced threat from our old nemesis the Soviet Union, ever-increasing pressure has resulted in recent decisions to slash defense appropriations. The U.S. Navy is expected to swallow its fair share of future reductions.

Hopefully, economics alone will not be the deciding factor for naval force reductions. However, if the U.S. is already committed to substantial unilateral naval reductions due to budgetary constraints, should we not attempt to seek a bilateral agreement in order to achieve similar offsetting reductions in those naval forces still being maintained and manufactured within the separate CIS states? After all, the once powerful Soviet navy did not sail over the horizon with communism. It is still there. Agreeably, it may pose a somewhat reduced conventional threat since its strength is being divided up between several CIS nations. But the recognition of the size and strength of this formidable navy should not be overlooked, as evidenced by the ongoing struggle over the mighty Black Sea fleet.

DISADVANTAGES

Despite the growing ground swell of consensus within the United States for dramatic reductions in our military forces following the conclusion of the Cold War, many recognize the need

to proceed toward such reductions with caution. Had it not been for the aggressive behavior recently displayed by the tyrant dictator of Iraq, the consensus that complete world peace was close at hand may have been clearly overwhelming throughout the West. Instead, we are now reminded that although the threat of global war is perhaps behind us for the immediate future, possibilities of major regional conflicts abound. For this and other reasons such as history, geopolitical asymmetries, and a rapidly changing world, opponents of naval arms control also present a strong argument.

The U.S. Navy is predominately offensive oriented and is required to achieve and maintain control of the seas in order to take the fight to the enemy. The former Soviet naval doctrine, on the other hand, is primarily one of defense of the homeland or a reactive role. Although the Soviet navy has become more offensive oriented in recent years, in the past the brunt of the offensive missions of the Soviet armed forces have been borne by the Red Army.¹¹

The geopolitical asymmetries between the United States and the former Soviet Union and accompanying differences in roles and missions of their respective naval forces make the development of an equitable naval arms control agreement difficult to achieve. We can ill afford to scrap a military-industrial base required to meet our long term shipbuilding needs. Especially when all we may stand to gain is offsetting CIS ground force reductions. Obviously, reconstitution of their

ground forces can be realized much sooner than the United States could heat up a cold shipbuilding line.

The fact that the United States is a maritime nation, vitally dependent upon sea control for its political, economic, and military existence, has not gone unnoticed by our national leadership. In August 1991, in his National Security Strategy of the United States, President Bush expressed his firm conviction to retain our nation's strong maritime capability:

The United States has long supported international agreements designed to promote openness and freedom of navigation on the high seas. Over the past year, however, the Soviet Union has intensified efforts to restrict naval forces in ways contrary to internationally recognized rights of access. We will continue to reject such proposals. As a maritime nation, with our dependence on the sea to preserve legitimate security and commercial ties, freedom of the seas is and will remain a vital interest.¹²

This point, more than any other, provides the rationale for why the United States must proceed with extreme caution in the area of naval arms control.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

History indicates we should not cut our defenses too quickly and too deeply at the close of the Cold War. Major defense cuts following World Wars I and II, and the resultant territorial aggressiveness which those acts may have indirectly led to,

should provide ample warning for today's national security decision makers.

Some eighty percent of all previous U.S. military conflicts have required a naval response of some form.¹³ We were further reminded by a former U.S. Chief of Naval Operations in 1988: "We should remember that maritime nations have seldom benefitted from naval disarmament treaties...The Washington Naval Conference of the 1920's proved to be one of those misguided policies, so seductive in the present, so harmful to the future."¹⁴ Our history as a maritime nation appears to demand a strong navy capable of controlling the sea lines of communication, regardless of recent reductions to the threat posed by our Cold War foe. In the words of naval historian Admiral A.T. Mahan, we Americans must never forget the strength and necessity of our maritime capabilities:

If a nation be so situated that it is neither forced to defend itself by land nor induced to seek extension of its territory by way of land, it has, by the very unity of its aim directed upon the sea, an advantage as compared with a people one of whose boundaries is continental.¹⁵

History has proven our naval forces have most often been called upon in the time of conflict.

POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

These are evolutionary times. There are so many dramatic changes occurring in the world today that agreeing to major

reductions in our naval force structure or significant restrictions of naval operations does not now seem prudent. Increased instances of U.S. overseas base closures, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and increased interdependence on international trade should serve as sufficient reasons for the United States to be wary of degradations to its naval capabilities.

To the contrary, it appears what is now more necessary than in recent times is the retention of a strong, flexible, and forward deployed naval power. Will our national leadership have the farsightedness to hold firm to those military capabilities to best meet the threat? Or will they take the easy way out and impose "fair share" reductions to all services? It appears that what is called for in the face of the existing security environment and fiscal crisis, is well thought out reductions according to requirements and military capabilities to meet those requirements. Should we not be looking most closely at major reductions in our large land army and air force, while retaining the strength of our naval forces? We must remain capable of projecting our national will when and where required worldwide. That strength lies in our naval forces - its aircraft carriers, surface combatants, and submarine fleets.

CONCLUSION

Now does not appear to be the time to enter into serious negotiations with the CIS on major naval arms control

initiatives. Negotiating with the newly formed CIS and its many separate leaders, each with a different agenda and security interests during this period of instability, could be likened to conducting business with a neighbor or business partner at a time when they are filing for bankruptcy. Who is in charge in the CIS? Who will be in charge in five years or even five months? Until we can answer these questions with more confidence, major concessions in the area of naval arms control is imprudent, impractical, and not in the best interest of the United States.

We have discussed the controversial issue of naval arms control; its history, present arguments for and against, and have examined some of the implications should the United States concede to ongoing initiatives. Clearly, this is not a simple political issue. Particularly given the existing instability in the Commonwealth of Independent States. The answer is not merely a yes or no, take it or leave it alternative. However, there are opportunities available to us at this evolutionary time which may not be available in even the near future. Such opportunities should be carefully examined and taken advantage of where possible, when judged to be in the best interest of our new national security objectives.

Our economy and a continuing struggle with a growing federal deficit will demand further reductions regardless of potential bilateral or multilateral agreements reached with other nations. overshadowing all of this, however, is the one constant. The United States is and will continue to be a maritime nation. As

we have learned by way of some bloody lessons in the past, a maritime nation must closely guard its ability to control the seas. To do that a strong, flexible, and capable naval force is required.

To summarize, in the words of President Bush, "American leadership is indispensable. That is our challenge."¹⁶ The United States has been the world's preeminent maritime power since the end of World War II. We have been able to sail the high seas uncontested. Global peace and stability have been greatly enhanced and often guaranteed directly by United States maritime power.¹⁷ Today however, we are facing severe reductions in naval forces, both from internal fiscal constraints as well as increased political pressures to include naval arms control in the overall arms control process. Our challenge is to sustain our traditional maritime preeminence through the effects of these dramatic changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the United States looks ahead to the challenge of tomorrow's unstable security environment, it will rely even more heavily on its naval forces to provide those capabilities required. Our reluctance to venture much beyond minor concessions (e.g. Confidence Building Measures) in the area of naval arms control in recent years is understandable. It is

possible however, that certain actions can be taken on a unilateral basis by either the United States or the Commonwealth of Independent States (preferably both), similar to the recent moves to eliminate naval tactical nuclear weapons by both nations. Other creative unilateralism such as this could serve to defuse much of the ongoing debate while creating significant international pressure on the other side to follow suit. Like reports of Mark Twain's death, reports of naval arms control's imminent demise are premature.

On the other hand, while it may be politically prudent to extend to CIS leaders some modest successes to facilitate continuation of their ongoing reforms, U.S. decision makers must take into account the full range of uncertainties of the future security environment. Put simply, the flexibility to accommodate future threats is not something we should bargain away.

Perhaps our country's forefather, General George Washington best summarized my conclusions on the subject of future naval arms control negotiations in this period of uncertainty. During a speech to Congress in 1780 he remarked, "There is nothing so likely to produce peace as to be well prepared to meet an enemy.

ENDNOTES

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3. Ibid., 31.
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6. Richard Fieldhouse, "The Case For Naval Arms Control," Arms Control Today, (February 1990): 9.
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